

Shingles

(Herpes Zoster)

What is shingles?

Shingles is a localized infection due to the varicella-zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox.

Who gets shingles?

Shingles occurs only in people who have had chickenpox in the past. It occurs when the dormant varicella virus is reactivated. Shingles may occur at any age in a person who has had chickenpox. It affects both sexes and all races with equal frequency and occurs sporadically throughout the year. The disease is seen primarily in the elderly.

How is shingles spread?

A person must have had chickenpox in the past to develop shingles. Why the virus reactivates in some individuals is not known. Contact with a person who has shingles does not cause another person's dormant virus to reactivate. However, the virus from a patient who has shingles may cause chickenpox in someone who has not had chicken pox.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The virus lies dormant in someone who has had chickenpox. It can reactivate many years or decades later.

When and for how long is a person able to spread shingles?

A person exposed to a patient with shingles will not get shingles but may get chickenpox if they are susceptible. The virus is present at the site of the rash and is contagious for a week after lesions (blisters) appear or until lesions become dry.

Does past infection make a person immune?

Yes. Most people who have shingles have only one episode of the disease in their lifetime, although some may have recurrent episodes. Those with impaired immune systems (people with AIDS, cancer, leukemia, etc.) may suffer repeated attacks.

What complications can happen from shingles?

Shingles is not usually dangerous to healthy individuals, although it can cause severe discomfort during an attack. Anyone with shingles on the upper half of his or her face, no matter how mild, should seek medical care at once since there is some danger that the virus could cause damage to the eye.

Continued on back page



What is the treatment for shingles?

Most cases of shingles resolve on their own without specific treatment. Prescription medications are available for treating shingles in some patients.

What can be done to prevent the spread of shingles?

Chickenpox must be prevented in order to prevent shingles. A vaccine for chickenpox has been developed. It is hoped that immunized individuals will be less likely to develop shingles later in life.

